

The Story of Ohio for Jesus

Ohio for Jesus is the encouraging story of God's Spirit uniting the hearts of believers who discovered their steps of faith and action were coming into alignment in such a miraculous way that no man or woman could take the credit.

By 2013, local and statewide presbyters and ministry leaders of the Ohio Ministry Network had identified Four Drivers that repeatedly emerged as a needed focus for the Network's churches and ministers: **Leader Development, Church Health, Missions Partnership, Church Multiplication.**

This multi-year conversation identified a need to more intently focus on Leader Development which previously had not been staffed or even identified as a major initiative. The conversation crystalized with a commitment to launch a campus for Spirit-filled higher education in Central Ohio to better serve the needs of Ohio's churches.

Simultaneously, a growing awareness emerged that Church Multiplication efforts needed to be maximized while existing churches needed strengthened and equipped. An expanding family of U.S. and World missionaries and missionary associates became an inspiring but challenging reality. The Network's camp and conference center, Heartland, kept growing at the same time, revealing that further expansion of facilities was critical.

By 2016, a recurring drumbeat in meetings of the presbytery was, "How are we going to get there? This all sounds and feels like God, but we need a plan to align structure, personnel, calendars and finances so we stay on track."

During these same years, a healthy tension in the area of finances emerged. A lingering leftover debt from the effects of the 2008 recession needed attention but opportunities for financial investment surfaced as well. Blessing other worthwhile ministries while reducing obligations both felt like Kingdom initiatives.

One of those ministries was the Assemblies of God of Tanzania. In 2014, their superintendent, Barnabas Mtokambali was invited to speak in Missouri at the 100th Anniversary Celebration of the Assemblies of God USA. Barnabas was asked to inspire America's ministers and churches with the story of the Tanzania for Jesus strategic plan.

A season of intentional prayer, fasting, self-evaluation and vision-casting in 2008 launched the ten-year plan in 2009 to see churches across the nation unite for unprecedented spiritual pursuits. By 2014, just five years into their 10-year plan, the saints and leaders of Tanzania rejoiced that they were well on their way to seeing their God-sized goals coming to pass!

When the Executive Presbyters heard the Tanzania for Jesus story in more detail, they felt compelled to financially underwrite the construction of one of their 55 new Church Planting Training campuses. Months of challenging conversations with the presbyters ensued. During the summer and fall of 2015, the same months of the presbytery's challenging quest for unity, Ohio superintendent John Wootton felt impressed to develop and share a message for Ohio's pastors and church leaders about broader unity in the body of Christ. This was on the heels of the same-sex marriage decision by the United States Supreme Court and during the nasty presidential primary season. After sharing the message at 14 locations on the annual "Celebration Tour," the presbyters commissioned Pastor Wootton to put the sermon into book form during a sabbatical scheduled for the summer of 2016.

At the same time, after multiple meetings and prayer sessions, the united decision was reached to just do it all. Without knowing where or when the financial resources would surface, the presbyters unanimously committed to eliminating debt and then blessing Tanzania. Within weeks of that expression of unity, an unexpected transaction took place late in 2015, providing more than enough funds to pay off the nagging loan and fully fund the offering goals for Tanzania and Emerge!

A domino effect began to take over. The speaker at the January 2016 Ohio Ministers Retreat, Scott Wilson, led the 400 ministers and spouses present in a powerful session of speaking in tongues and interpretation, where a powerful prophetic word emerged encouraging us toward unity.

Later that year, the invitation came from Tanzania for Pastor Wootton to dedicate the newly-constructed Church Planting Training School in the Northern Morogoro district. Ohio's presbyters commissioned him to take part but insisted he not go alone, sending additional presbytery delegates, Josh Willaford and David Bittinger. The three returned from their February 2017 excursion with an exciting but challenging report of the spiritual desperation and incredible unity and progress they witnessed.

By the summer of 2017, a consultant named Mike Messner was secured to lead the presbyters and ministry directors on a strategy and vision journey. Monthly meetings regularly incorporated a vigorous dive into the Network's history and current situation. Strengths and weaknesses were identified and examined.

When the invitation from Tanzania arrived to return in 2018, but this time with a much larger delegation, it seemed like confirmation to have a front row seat to observe the results of a sister ministry organization who had similar strategy and visions conversations, only ten years earlier. Consequently, 44 Ohio presbyters and leaders went to Tanzania in February 2018 and returned determined to, not copy what was happening in Tanzania, but to develop our own strategic plan under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Presently, in Ohio, we are launching into a season of prayer and fasting and asking our churches to dream about what God could do in their local church and community.